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U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Significant Structural Progress Reported on Basrah Children's Hospital Construction

By John Connor
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BAGHDAD, Iraq –Construction on the Basrah Children's Hospital is showing "significant structural progress" now that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is leading the high-profile initiative.

That assessment was delivered at a conference in Baghdad by Lt. Cmdr. Chad Lorenzana, the resident engineer handling the project for the Basrah Office of the Gulf Region South arm of USACE. "It's actually starting to look like a hospital," he said of the project, whose champions include First Lady Laura Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. He said construction is now 64 percent complete.

Lt. Col. Kenneth McDonald, the deputy GRS commander who heads the Basrah office, said the overall cost of hospital is \$163 million. He said when the hospital actually opens will be determined by the Iraqi Ministry of Health but that the target opening date is January 2009.

The plan calls for construction of a state-of-the-art pediatric facility with a focus on oncology. Participating in the Bagdad conference were representatives of the several organizations involved as partners in the project. They reviewed developments to date and prospects and challenges as the project moves toward completion.

"While it looks good and there has been a lot of progress, we're not done until we're done," said Brig. Gen. Michael Walsh, commander of USACE's Gulf Region Division in welcoming project partners and conference participants from Pro-



Frederick Gerber of Project Hope speaks to participants of the Basrah Children's Hospital Partnership Conference held recently in Baghdad. [USACE Photo]

ject Hope, the United Nations Development Program, the World Health Organization, the U.S. State Department, the GRD, and the Iraqi Ministry of Health.

A number of the partners noted that building the hospital is only part of the job. Other key tasks include staffing it with qualified people and maintaining the facility over time.

Col. Steve Hill, who commands GRS, said, "This is as complicated a project as I've ever seen." He said GRS has 153 projects in the works this year and that the Basrah Children's hospital is among those with the highest priority.

As the project moves ahead, "It's going to get more hectic" in terms of on site coordination, said Steve Vilonel of the UNDP, which is managing the use of a contribution of nearly \$22 million by the government of Spain. Walsh said the number of partners involved in the project

makes it imperative that communications be well connected at all levels. "So these meetings are very important," he said.

Lorenzana stressed the importance of getting engineers from the Iraqi Ministry of Health working on site so they can see how the hospital is being built and better understand what will be needed to maintain the facility going forward. He said a trailer has been set up for this purpose and is ready for occupancy. Col. Hill underscored this point, saying he'd like to see a list of the Iraqi MoH engineers designated to work at the site. He also said he'd like to know when they are expected to arrive.

Frederick Gerber of Project Hope, a non-governmental organization specializing in health education that has contributed \$30 million to the project, reviewed the project's history, including its rocky start.

The U.S. Congress allocated \$50 million for the project in 2003. "Fifty million is what this project was supposed to cost," said Gerber. Construction got under way

in 2005, with the USAID as the lead agency and Bechtel as the contractor. The project was to have been completed in 2006. But problems arose, including site issues, soaring material costs, and a worsening security situation. Delays ensued and construction was halted. Last year, USACE replaced USAID as the lead agency on the project and Mid Contracting, an Amman, Jordan-based firm, replaced Bechtel.

Dr. Abd al-Samad Rahman, the Iraqi Minister of Health, addressed the conference. He spoke of the innocence of children and said of the effort to build the hospital that "it is the duty of us all." The Minister asked about the delays and Walsh replied in part that "a lot of this happened because we had a contractor who didn't do very well when he started and we asked him to leave."

Walsh also told the assembled project partners that "in my 30 years of construction, there are always problems and people of good intentions get together and find solutions."

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